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ABSTRACT

Prompted by the dichotomy in mass communication research between active audience and passive audience, this paper (1) establishes and analyzes the theoretical components of the concepts of "activity" and "active audience," (2) traces the intellectual origins of the concepts and their implicit ideological agenda, and (3) critiques the implications of the concept of audience activity for cognitive and social theory and research. The paper first examines the facets of activity, giving recognition to the psychologist Raymond Bauer, who created the phrase "active audience." Its other sections discuss the meaning of activity, internalized freedom and cognitive activity, the rift between conscious and the unconscious processing, and a more modest appraisal of activity. The paper concludes by noting that the concept of active audience defined as cognitive independence, personal freedom, and imperviousness to influence appears simultaneously to be bloated out of all proportion and seemingly anemic and thin. A 5-page list of references concludes the paper. (HOD)

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"THE ACTIVE AUDIENCE": TRIVIA, EXAGGERATION, OR IDEOLOGY

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At the very center of mass communication research there lies a fundamental dichotomy, a split between opposite conceptions of the mass communication process and its audience. Often visible in uses and gratifications research, the debate extends far beyond that paradigm. In one of its many forms it permeates a number of theoretical and methodological debates.

Over the last forty years of theory and research, a kind of theoretical tug of war has emerged. On one end of the rope we find the <u>active audience</u>: individualistic, "impervious to influence," rational and selective. On the other end, we have the <u>passive audience</u>: conformist, gullible, anomic, vulnerable, a victim. Huffing and tugging at each end is an assorted lot of key media theorists championing their perception of the social reality.

Mass communication theory seems to want to embrace both conceptions simultaneously. This important dichotomy frames many of the questions we ask about the socio-political role of the media, the audience member's cognitions of self and "reality," as well as the moment to moment cognitive processes by which the individual decodes media content and form. What are the limits of individual intellectual freedom in the face of the institutions for the dissemination of information and ideology? Are these institutions vehicles for social conformism or bearers of liberating knowledge?

Such questions call out for a theoretical analysis of the fundamental epistemological assumptions that guide, and sometimes mislead, our research on the nature of the mass media and its audience. Because of the central importance of this amorphous

active-passive dichotomy in mass communication theory, this paper will 1) establish and analyze the theoretical components of the concepts of "activity" and of the "active audience", 2) trace the intellectual origins of the concepts and their implicit ideological agenda, 3) and finally, critique the implications of the concept of audience activity for cognitive and social theory and research.

THE FACETS OF "ACTIVITY"

For the uses and gratifications "paradigm," the concept of the active audience is a key player on an often disorganized chess board of theories, beliefs, and conceits. Theorists in this paradigm insist that the concept of audience activity "is important" (Rouner, 1984, p. 174), "constitutes one of the essential underpinnings of the approach" (Palmgreen, in press, p. 33), and is "fundamental to the study of mass communication effects in general, and central to the uses and gratifications approach in particular" (Levy, 1983, p. 109). For some sober observers, active audience theory may itself be "a new 'dominant paradigm' in effects research" (Hawkins and Pingree, in press). Even among some of the critics of uses and gratifications, the concept of audience activity constitutes "a decided gain over the psychological assumptions underpinning the older research tradition" (Carey and Kreiling, 1974) which "we should applaud" (Swanson, 1979).

One of the strengths and, simultaneously, one of the weaknesses of the construct is its "extraordinary range of meanings" (Blumler, 1979, p. 205). It is both cognitive and empirical, normative and objective, socially variable yet innate. The various qualitative

forms of the concept exist within a temporal dimension as well. Like media consumption behavior, activity is said to exist prior to media use ("preactivity"), during media use ("duractivity"), and following media use ("postactivity") (Levy and Windahl, 1984a, 1984b; Blumler, 1979; Levy, 1983).

It has become clear that this literature has given birth to a protean and infinitely malleable meta-construct. Each facet purports to define a intangible and relative process called "activity." Before critiquing the whole let us first dissect the parts in search of an underlying structure.

1. Audience activity as selectivity:

> Probably the origins of the concept of activity lie deeply tied to the simple concept of choice. Grounded in the theories of selective attention, perception, and retention (Klapper, 1960), audience activity is portrayed as the funneling process of media, program, and content selection. In the uses and gratifications literature, the term "selectivity" is most often used to denote selective exposure rather than selective perception and retention (Levy, 1983, p. 110)

2. Audience activity as utilitarianism:

> In an extension of the concept of selectivity, theorists using this facet of the concept emphasize the <u>utility</u> of the process of choice. Here the audience member is the embodiment of the self-interested consumer. Beyond mere selectivity which in some cases implied a certain defensiveness on the part of the audience, the utilitarian version of the concept suggests a certain level of rational choice in the satisfaction of clear individual needs and motives (Dervin, 1980)
>
> Levy (1983) refers to a subset of this concept with the simple label, "use," to denote the social and psychological utility of the media content following exposure. Examples of this form of audience "activity" would include post exposure reflection on content, discussion, and "small talk."

3. Audience activity as intentionality:

> Here the concept is used to emphasize the existence of prior needs and motivations which direct the selective behavior. Motivation structures lead to the question of personality and to typologies of needs and drives (McGuire, 1974).

It is in this form that the concept emphasizes the more cognitive dimensions of activity. Intentionality points to schematic processing and structuring of incoming information. (Planalp & Hewes, 1982; Fiske & Kinder, 1981; Swanson, 1979). Media consumption and attention are said to be schema driven. Patterns of consumption and memory bear the clear imprint of the audience member's motivation, personality, and individual cognitive processing structure.

4. Audience activity as "involvement":

Staying in the cognitive area, Levy's (1983) use of this "value" of audience activity principally denotes the level of attention and "cognitive effort" during exposure to the medium. According to Hawkins and Pingree (in press), "cognitive effort" has become the focus of methodological and theoretical debate. Levy (1983) also uses the label "involvement" to both characterize the level of "affective arousal," and a level of cognitive organization and information structuring. The same activity term is further used to label behavioral manifestations of active "involvement," such as parasocial interaction (eg. "talking back" to the television.)

5. Audience activity as "imperviousness to influence":

Though the phrase "imperviousness to influence" is identified with Bauer (1964), this facet of "activity" can be cited as the socio-political "bottom line" of the concept. It combines and sums up all of the above, and has underlined the "effect" of activity on the process of mass communication.

This activity is sometimes portrayed as subversive of communicator goals and intentions. Using examples of failed information campaigns drawn from the body of limited effects research, Dervin (1980) has joined with others in extending this dimension of the concept into a phenomenological individualism emphasizing ideosyncratic decodings of "information."

Though this taxonomy of the forms of the concept reveals the breadth of its use, it does not uncover the soul of the concept. This taxonomy, a collection of castings of the concept, conceals the driving force, a cultural source bound to an ideological commitment. This ideological commitment is enlaced with liberal democratic ideals of individual rationality, independence, and "self-possession." The source of that stance can be surmised from the independence cry resonating from the notion of "imperviousness to influence." To understand and fully analyze the concept of

active audience and the research agenda it has engendered, we must appreciate it's intellectual origins. It is here that activity displays its animus.

BAUER'S INDEPENDENCE CRY

The creator of the phrase "imperviousness to influence" and the "obstinate audience," which later became euphemistically translated to the "active audience," is the psychologist Raymond Bauer (1964; Bauer, R.A. and A. Bauer, 1960). Bauer is almost universally cited among uses and gratifications theorists and critics as the author of this declaration of audience independence (Blumler, 1979; Palmgreen, in press; Dervin, 1980; Levy, 1983; Levy and Windahl, 1984; McLeod and Becker, 1974,1981; McGuire, 1974; Carey and Kreiling, 1974; Elliot, 1974; McQuail and Gurevitch, 1974; McQuail, 1983)

For these theorists, Bauer's article is a milestone in a purported "paradigm shift" from "administrative" approaches to more receiver oriented research perspectives. (For some, the change in perspective was merely a more sophisticated way of refining the communicators' viewpoint and objectives.)

Bauer's mission is clearly signalled in the first paragraphs of his article. He quotes Isidor Chein (1962) approvingly:

> The opening sentence of Ethical Standards of Psychologists is that, "the psychologist is committed to a belief in the dignity and worth of the individual human being."... But what kind of dignity can we attribute to a robot? (p. 31)

Bauer was decrying the temperament of a decade when Skinnerians held court in psychology departments and the Cassandra's of mass culture theory bickered and warned that mass media had brought Pavlovian conformism into the home via TV. Mass communication theorists joined with like minded colleagues in psychology and

sociology to exorcise the evil spirit and rescue the abstract individual. In this classic article the media, led by advertising and social scientific institutions, are pitted against the individual armed only with his or her good sense and "obstinate" psyche.

Framed within almost mythic terms, he puts forward a versic of the passive and active dichotomy. A model of "one-way influence" (the passive audience) which Bauer associates with an odd alliance of exploitative communicators and mass culture critics is pitted against a model which is couched in the language of the marketplace, a "transactional model." Here "exchanges are equitable" and "each party expect(s) to 'get his money's worth'"(pp. 319, 320)

What Bauer was attempting to retrieve was not so much the individual, as the liberal democratic image of the individual. The ideal independent citizen who is rational, self-determining, and freely pursuing life, liberty, and property. This model of the individual was also threatened by social critics who pointed out that in a society where mass production and mass produced consensus were king and queen, democracy was illegitimate.

It is clear in the article that Bauer's primary impetus for the "active audience" model is a moral one and not a scientific one. He writes, "The issue is not...the findings of social science... The real issue is whether our social model of man - the model we use for running society -- and our scientific model or models -- the one we use for running subjects -- should be identical." (p. 319).

The tone of urgency in this debate revealed that the early active audience theorists implicitly shared a crucial assumption of

the passive audience model -- the Orwellian specter of a truly Mass Society. The mass production of messages presented a certain illusion. Everywhere the TV image, the newspaper page were exactly the same. It seemed obvious. Everywhere there was a similarity of form. The exact same physical image could be seen in the subway, in the newspaper, in the home. From this illusion came the logical leap which claimed that the exact, same physical message, reproduced its exact likeness in the consciousness of the audience. The result seemed equally obvious. The mass production process had evolved into the assembly line of the mind.[1]

There were a number of possible reactions to the specter of mass society. The revolutionary individualism of the sixties and its multi-pronged attack on conformist institutions was one response. There was an opposite tack, the one taken by theorists of the active audience. This tack was to reassert the sanctity of the individual by simply denying that mass society existed. To some degree it involved denying the ascendancy of the mass in mass communication. Blumler (1979), a leading exponent of uses and gratifications theory, notes that this school has "always been strongly opposed to 'mass audience' terminology as a way of labelling the collectivities that watch TV shows, attend movies, and read magazines and newspapers in their millions" (p. 21)

But the new active audience left something to be desired. The active "individual" was a modern citizen-consumer patrolling the periphery of his or her consciousness with a vigilant consumerism. This was not the citizen of Rousseau or Jefferson. This was a shopkeeper's citizen. The freedom of choice was a consumerist cornucopia of choices. What could be more appropriate in a mass

culture typified by mass consumption than to glorify choice, the mere act of selecting a mass media product, as the hallmark of individualism and activism. Freedom was achieved by denying the effectiveness of mass communication and mass culture and by multiplying through a process of infinite regression the number of choices. With the statistical explosion of probabilities and choices, how could mass culture take hold? The passive audience was liberated.

In succeeding articles declarations of the death of the passive audience was to become an academic ritual while the pursuit of the active audience has become an ideological imperative (for an example of a widespread phenomena see Berlo, 1977; Palmgreen, in press; McLeod and Becker, 1981). It was to become in the words of Bauer "the model which ought to be inferred from the research"(1964, p. 319) In research that followed attempts have been made to turn the "ought" into an "empirical reality." But we will argue that the ideological agenda at the base of the commitment to this "article of faith" (Blumler 1979, p. 33) has led to many oversights, oversimplifications, and tortuous reasoning as the concept expands into a system of research.

IN SEARCH OF THE OVERALL MEANING OF ACTIVITY

From the previous section we can see why the concept of audience activity is often defined negatively through negation of its nemesis- the passive audience. Often depicted in terms of the extreme stereotype of mass society theorists (LeBon, 1896, Durkeheim, 1964 [1893], Reisman, 1950), the passive audience is grey, uniform, anomic, faceless, gullible, and defenseless against

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the power of the propagandist. The mass waits vulnerable and irrational.

This sociological myth is in some ways a pastiche of images generated by the media themselves. Mass disseminated images are retrieved of masses screaming in unison at 30's Nuremberg rallies, farmers running out of their homes during Orson Welles' "War of the Worlds", millions of faceless consumers salivating for the mass produced good life. These are referents for the labels and stereotypes of mass entertainment and the public opinion surveys. A young researcher, for example, acknowledges and perpetuates the mythic passive audience with her characterization of a "global priesthood" with "non-selective" and "habitual" viewing habits (Rouner, 1984, p. 168).

We might ask whether this mythic entity ever existed other than in the rhetorical flights of a few writers? In the new expansive universe of the active audience is it possible to be inactive or passive? Has the straw man of the passive audience been smothered by a gaseous entity called "activity?"

As the reader will recall, we find among the main tenets of the activity theory, referents principally to utility, intentionality, selectivity (Blumler, 1979) and to invlovement or cognitive activity (Levy, 1979).

Looking at utility first, we ask if it is likely for the uses and gratifications researcher to ever get the response from subjects that they "use" the mass media because it has absolutly no use for them. Blumler's definition of utility, "mass media has uses for people," apart from being exceedingly trivial and obvious, defines "use," any use whatsoever, as an indicator of activity. Can this "activity" fail to dominate over its passive nemesis of "un-use?"

Looking at intentionality a similar problem emerges. This activity is defined by Blumler as "media consumption...directed by prior motivation." (1979, p. 203). Again we must ask whether we should be surprised that our audience members rarely respond that they read newspapers, listen to the radio, or watch television for "absolutely no reason at all." Self report methodology by its very nature and structure invites the respondent to give meaning to his or her behavior. If the existence of "passivity" is to be defined by self reports of unmotivated behavior, should we be surprised by its absence?

The concepts of selectivity and involvement add to the definitional inflation of the construct. The process of selectivity, the sheer act of choice is used as an indicator of activity. But it is almost <u>impossible</u> for the audience member to use the media without "choosing" to do so or at least selecting a medium. An audience member scanning a newspaper will inevitably be activated to choose some content. It is a rare audience member indeed who will randomly turn to any medium and randomly select some content. But according to some measures of activity random flicking of the dial or surveying the offerings would turn the audience member into a member of the "active audience" (Levy and Windahl, 1984) In this case we would have the paradoxical result that the highly selective audience member who watches only a specific program will appear "less active" than the less selective "channel hopper."

And finally, if "involvement" is defined as <u>some</u> level of "cognitive or affective arousal" (Levy and Windahl, 1984a) or the use of schema to process media content, then only brain death would

render an individual a member of the passive audience.

From this brief critique of the concept of activity we can see that the pliable facets of the concept make it completely unfalsifiable. It is by definition nearly impossible for the audience not to be active. Unable to distinquish media behavior from all human choice, selection, and motivation, the concept of activity is so easily expandible and global as to dilute the underlying ideological commitment to the voluntarism, rationality, and selectivity of the audience.

Levy and Windahl (1984a) while presenting a typology of activity apologize that "given the global nature of the activity concept, it is unlikely that this typology is exhaustive" (p. 53). Hawkins and Pingree (in press) after presenting a typology of their own, also apologize that they "cannot claim that the above list is exhaustive; there probably are some other cognitive activities...." Unfortunately, we must agree and wonder if an exhaustive typology of every cognitive and behavioral twitch of this "global" concept is even possible. The meaning of activity is so broad and all encompassing to be synonymous with choice and possibly with life itself.

INTERNALIZED FREEDOM AND THE RETREAT INTO COGNITIVE ACTIVITY

Since much of the underpinnings of our social system lie anchored in Enlightenment notions of reason (Cassirer, 1951), it is no wonder that potential threats to this philosophy and the claims to self-determination which it upholds, have been met with desperate resistance.

The irrational philosophies of man popular at the beginning of

this century and the seeming susceptiblity of the public to media disseminated propaganda provoked alarm among media and social theorists (Lippman, 1965 [1922]; Lasswell, 1927) while offering opportunities for others (Bernays, 1965). Ever since Luther's pamphlet, Freedom of a Christian ([1520] 1952), both freedom and self-determination have been anchored by an inner freedom, control over the realm of ones thoughts (Marcuse, [1936] 1972). The rational, self determined individual is the "bottom line" of the philosophy of liberal democracy and possessive individualism (MacPherson, 1962).

Each new communication technology (movies, television, computers, satellite broadcasting) and each potential psychological refinement by advertisers and propagandists ("subliminal techniques", physiological monitoring, etc.) activates public alarm over potential loss of cognitive independence. The history of mass communication effects research can be seen as a response to perceived threats to the sanctity of the individual and this realm of inner freedom and self determination [movies: (Payne Studies); comics (Wertham, 1954); television (Surgeon General, 1971; Gerbner, 1980); ideological stampeding (Noelle-Neumann, 1977); mass psychotic behavior (Phillips, 1980); to name a few].

If the concept of audience activity is to maintain its theoretical link to the concept of "imperviousness to influence," then the cognitive, as opposed to the behavioral area, represents the "final frontier." Though uses and gratifications theorists acknowledge the importance of psychological research from within their paradigm (Rouner, 1984), they also sadly acknowledge a "scarcity of empirical investigations of psychological origins"

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(Palmgreen, in press) and of needs, motivations, and cognitive processes.

When describing the audience activity as information processing, active audience theorists point out that individuals have varying levels of attention (Anderson and Lorch, 1983; Levy, 1983) and involvement (Levy, 1983; Levy and Windahl, 1984a, 1984b). Theorists characterized media use as intentional, goal directed, and motivated behavior(McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972; Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, 1974; Rosengren, 1974). Individuals "construct meanings" in accordance with motivations and schema (Swanson, 1977; Delia, 1977; Levy, 1983). They are also active by becoming cognitively or affectively aroused (Levy, 1983; Levy and Windahl, 1984) which might be manifested as parasocial behavior (Levy, 1977; Levy, 1983).

A researcher describes the specific meaning of the above terms by describing "active television viewing" as viewing that "goes beyond mere exposure and might involve critical or analytical processing of information..." where viewers "may think about aspects of character and plot" which they "do...immediately or later" (Rouner, 1984, p. 170-171). The same writer goes so far as to imply innate bases for "activity" such as "IQ"(p. 170) Such sketchy outlines often define the cognitive dimensions of "audience activity."

Given such descriptions, we must confess that if activity is to be defined simply by the fact that audience members process information, use schema, and in effect "think" while using a medium, then obviously, audience activity must be granted. But as we have previously noted above, this low level threshold for the designation

of activity renders the concept not only obvious, but unfalsifiable and trivial, while failing to distinguish any significant differences between the processing of media information and the cognitive processing of any other human experience. If simple processing equals activity then the motto of the active audience theorist should be, "I think, therefore I am active."

Incorporating cognitive, affective, personality, and motivational psychological theory is McGuire's (1974) listing of psychological theories of motivation and need. Though he includes cognitive theories in a typology (McGuire wryly calls it a "'cafeteria' display") that is both impressive and enlightening, his discussion and dichotomization of the theories into active and passive is flawed. He sidesteps any definiton of active and passive by merely stating that he uses the "classic polarity of active versus passive initiation"(p. 171). "Classic" implies that the boundaries between the two should be obvious. While this may be true for behavior (active or passive behavior), it is certainly not true for "black box," cognitive phenomena. This leads to shifting standards when constructing the typology. For example, the reader is told that consistency theories which emphasize "selectivity" and a "striving to maintain a complex and precarious connectedness and coherence among his or her inner experiences" are active theories (p.174). A few pages later the reader finds that similar "ego-defensive theories" which emphasize "selective attention and... perception" wherein an individual "extracts information to construct one's self concept" are <u>passive</u> theories (p. 186).

The active-reactive-passive debate over the cognitive activity of the audience does not rotate on the point of whether the audience

"thinks" and processes information or on typologies of motivational theory. Rather the question turns on whether the audience has active control over the structure of the information process, and whether the individual is best described not as passive but as reactive to forms and content of the media. Anderson and Lorch (1983) demarcate the battle ground clearly when they state that "the active theory puts control of viewing directly within the viewer (rather) than with the television set" (p. 9). This crucial and somewhat political point is echoed by uses and gratification theorists who argue that the audience member "bend(s) programs, articles, films, and songs to his own purposes" (Blumler, 1979, p. 202) and which leads McLeod and Becker (1981) to observe that "audience members in the real world exercise considerable freedom in their use of the mass media" (p. 71). Echoing our discussion at the beginning of this section, we see that the "bottom line" remains one of "inner freedom" and "self determination."

Anderson and Lorch (1983) peg the active-reactive debate on the key issue of the processing of formal properties of the medium, specifically TV. Their question is whether the formal properties of the medium guide or "control" processing of content leading individuals to react to the medium, or whether the intiative lies with the active individual who uses "strategies" to manipulate media content.

Using an ingenious experimental manipulation involving altered versions of the "Sesame Street" program, Anderson and Lorch do show that attention among children is related to comprehension. They claim further to have isolated various formal features, namely "cues

for attention," that are used within active viewing strategies by children as markers of interesting content. Anderson and Lorsch's work clearly deflates the excessively passive caricatures of the audience peddled by popular writers (Winn, 1973, Mander, 1978). Mander, for example, writes that the viewer has "no cognition, no discernment, no notations upon the experience [s/he] is having,"..."the viewer is little more than a vessel of reception."

But what are we to make of these findings in the active-reactive-passive debate? Anderson and Lorsch (1983) in a rather polemical article feel they cannot eliminate the claims for automatic viewing processes. This is brought out even in their own research which shows a process of "attentional inertia" which maintains viewing (or nonviewing) "across breaks in comprehension and changes in content"(p. 9). This at the very least shows that the cognitive processing is not as vigilant as one might suppose from the theoretical claims.

Furthermore, even Anderson and Lorsch's "attentional cues" are the result of a process of media training, or what might be called "media socialization." These provide guides to cognitive processing which are taken up by the individual. Importantly, the internalization of attentional cues comes after a thorough initiation into the terrain of television's forms and conventions. Levy and Windahl (1984a) who purport to offer a "model of audience activity and gratifications" (p. 58) ignore this highly reactive process and acknowledge that their "model does not currently deal with processes of or socialization to media consumption nor with the creation of new patterns of media use"(p. 58) If a laboratory rat learns to "actively" press the right bars to receive some pleasant

electronic stimulus, where does the locus of control stand: with the cognitive maneuverings of the laboratory rat or with the reinforcer?

The children's minds that Anderson and Lorsch describe are still minds in which the medium retains a great deal of initiative and, lest we forget, minds "strategically active" but also strategically inducted into a world in which all experience is prefabricated. We cannot assume that because there is evidence of processing, including strategic processing, that the viewer indeed "exercises considerable freedom."

SCHEMA DRIVEN VERSUS DATA DRIVEN AND THE RIFT BETWEEN CONSCIOUS AND THE UNCONSCIOUS PROCESSING

In the cognitive area the battle between the active and the reactive/passive conceptions of the media viewer nexus is often recast in terms of the conscious versus the unconscious mind. In parallel terminology, it may be cast as the relative dominance of strategic processing versus automatic processing. The active audience theory has an undercurrent of 19th century rationalism and individualism, and the conscious mind is crucial to a defense of this philosophical stance.

The very definition of the active audience, as it is found in the communication literature, implies a vigilant, self-directed, rationalistic consciousness aware of its needs and motivations, bending media materials in pursuit of these motivations and in the maintenance of cognitive independence. Hawkins and Pingree (in press) following a suggestion by Salamon (1983) point to "cognitive effort" and "mindful and deep processing" as a purely conscious or "nonautomatic mental elaboration." If a significant part of the processing occurs outside the conscious mind or unconsciously, if

the unconscious cognitive processing is largely directed by media forms and structures, and if memory reflects as much the unconscious processes as the conscious ones, then the active audience member would be lord over a highly reduced territory.

This points to a significant realm of unconscious processing wherein the medium, its semiotic/syntactic forms, and automatic cognitive processes dominate over conscious attentional or goal motivated processes. Lachman, Lachman, & Butterfield (1979) in an excellent review of information processing literature point out that,

> It is the exception and not the rule when thinking is conscious; but by its very nature, conscious thought seems the only sort. It is not the only sort; it is the minority...There are many forms of life whose information procesing is accomplished entirely without benefit of consciousness. Unconscious processing is phylogenetically prior and constitutes the product of millions of years of evolution. Conscious processing is in its evolutionary infancy...(p. 298)

One such "automatic" or unconscious process which has been studied in relation to television viewing is the orienting reflex [Kimmel, Van Olst, and Orlebeke, 1979). Reeves et al. (1984,1984b) used a continuous measure of alpha waves to study the involuntary orienting response to movement and edits in television commercials. Alpha waves have been shown to be negatively correlated with mental effort and attention. Reeves et al. found that these purely formal characteristics of the medium forced the viewers to cognitively react to communicator controllable, formal features. It was further found that data driven drops in alpha were positively correlated with learning as measured by immediate and delayed recall measures. Reeves et al. provide evidence of significant cognitive processes which seem to clearly influence and sometimes bypass the processing strategies of the viewer. Furthermore these stimulus driven

orientation responses lead to the successful imprinting of information into memory.

The alpha wave measures call into question Anderson and Lorsch's (1983) contention that such movements are merely cues for comprehensibility since the orienting reflex can be triggered by sudden incomprehensible and primitve stimuli such as random light or sound bursts. The response is clearly stimulus driven, reactive, largely involuntary, and manipulable by the communicator. These findings clearly support a reactive theory of television in which the final semantic residue of a specific media experience involves a kind of cortical dialog between the formal features and content of the medium and the schema of the audience member. While the resulting memory trace is not absolutely determined as to content, the processing guidance provided by the formal features of the medium significantly outline the majority of audience decodings.

The activity/independence of the audience is circumscribed by data driven factors such as the nature of the medium, its symbol systems, and the types of processing skills these address. Salomon (1979) contends, following a review of cognitive and educational literature, that media and their symbol systems "vary as to the mental skills they call upon and cultivate" (Salomon, 1979, p. 85) A medium may in fact create or develop the processing skills in the media user (Ruwet, 1974). There is evidence that in areas in which the audience member has little information or intricate schematic maps, the audience member's internal representations will be highly dependent on the structure of the symbol system used to convey the information. Irregardless of the well estabished theory that

information is schema driven and these schema provide "anticipatory frameworks" for decoding, Neisser (1976), who is invariably cited whenever the word "schema" is used, acknowledges the significance of the data driven aspects of the information acquisition process. Learning would be impossible without it.

Information processing, though sometimes relatively unconscious, may display astounding persistence. Shepard's (1967) now classic series of experiments on the tremendous capacity of the mind for recognition memory even in states of low motivation and "activity" is an excellent example of such processes. When we consider the fact that these processes are actively exploited by communicators such as advertisers (Krugman, 1977), the question of cognitive "independence" based on schematic processing alone, appears exaggerated.

That cognitive activity did not equal independence or individuality was a point not lost upon one of the intellectual founders of liberal democratic notions of individuality and self-determination. It is well worth noting in the words of Locke ([1694] 1952), that "...liberty cannot be where there is no thought, no volitions, no will; but there may be thought, there may be will, there may be volition, where there is no liberty"(p. 180).

SOCIAL ORIGINS OF ACTIVITY AND THE "LOCUS OF CONTROL"

To Jean Paul Sartre ([1960] 1976) the question of the activity or passivity of the individual in face of the media seemed reasonably clear:

> When I listen to a broadcast, the relation between the broadcaster and myself is not a human one: in effect, I am passive in relation to what is being said, to the political commentary on the news, etc. This passivity, is an activity which develops on every level and over many years, can to some

> extent be resisted: I can write, protest, approve, congratulate, threaten, etc. But it must be noted that these activities will carry weight only if a majority (or a considerable minority) of listeners who do not know me do likewise...(p. 271)[2]

Sartre's simple discussion brings up the political question of control to which we will also add the scientific question of cause. Both are different faces of the same issue.

The question of the source of activity or the "locus of control" lies at the heart of the active versus passive debate. "Locus of control" can be defined as the place or agent wherein resides the major determining or causal force of the content and orientation of audience members cognitions and behavior. Does this locus of control lie in the social origins of motivations, in some psychological force, in the forms of the medium itself or the persuasive communicator, or does it reside in the sanctity of the active individual? If the concept of "activity" is to have the political teeth alluded to by Sartre, or even if the concept is to have psychological strength, this question must be answered. This is the question we address in this section.

For the early mass society theorist the locus of control lay with the manipulators of the mass media while for more demographic and class oriented traditions (Lasarasfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1948), the locus of control lay in common and predictable experiences and socialization influences that cut along class or demographic lines. In another tradition (McLuhan 1962, 1964) the locus of control lay with the medium itself, its formal features, and its powerful organization of experience. There are certainly other stances than these and countless combinations and permutations. The truth may indeed lie in a well integrated

combination of these.

Active audience theory has of course gravitated to those assertions that posit most of the locus of the control within the individual. When this has been forcefully asserted, it has often been cast as exaggerration wherein the individual is militantly self-determined. Dervin (1980), using tenuous metaphorical references to physical theories of relativity, sketches a theory of exagerrated phenomenological subjectivism that sometimes teeters on the abyss of solipsism.[3] McLeod and Becker (1974) have observed, "Perhaps the approach does depict the audience as too powerful if it can be inferred that almost any need can induce any media behavior, which, in turn, provides any gratification"(p. 80).

It is rarely an all or nothing proposition. More often the active audience theorist retains the locus of control within the individual as against the mass medium, but acknowledges the influence of social and psychological forces. For example Levy and Windahl (1984) state that while individuals are "conditioned by social and psychological structures" and constrained "by available communications, individuals choose what communication settings they will enter" and that this decision is "motivated by goals and uses that are self-defined" (p. 51-52). What we have is often an attempt to maintain the sanctity of the individual including rhetorical statements regarding individual freedom as much of the causal force shifts to vaguely specified antecedent social and psychological forces.

McGuire (1974) "(admits) that external circumstances play a large part in determining one's media exposure" but nonetheless asserts that this "does not rule out the possibility that personal

needs are also a factor"(p. 168).[2] Palmgreen (in press) acknowledges that "cultural and social stereotypes and norms play a major role in forming both individual and collective expectations about media objects." While mentioning the importance of these factors which obviously influence the locus of the control and the direction of preponderant influence, uses and gratification and active audience theorists state that they have paid "less attention" to "social and psychological origins" (Palmgreen, in press), and that "social and environmental circumstances that lead people to turn to the mass media are... little understood" (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevtich, 1974). These theorists add that "there is no theoretical framework which systematically links gratification to their social and psychological origins" (Levy, 1977).

But then what of claims of "imperviousness to influence" of the audience? How much real, fully exercised control lies in the hands of the audience member? In the classic terminology of Sartrean existential philosophy are the audience members oriented <u>for themselves</u> or <u>for the other</u>, or to put it another way is the individual "active" for himself or herself or "active" as an agent of social structures and forces? If the individual's relation to the media and media content is largely determined by social or socio-psychological imperatives some of which may be <u>media generated</u>, then are the claims of "freedom of choice," "self-definition," and "cognitive independence" rhetorical exaggerrations? Has ideological commitment to a free and independent individual cast too optimistic a light on the socially buffeted audience member? These questions are important because they address the larger

question of freedom and determinism of which the communication theory's active-passive debate is an instantiation.

If the audience member is not as much in control of the process as implied by active audience theorists, what we may have then is a largely amorphic vessel within which swirls the influence of larger forces. The individual becomes the vortex in a whirling pattern of physiological, psychological, social, and formal/semiotic structures.

It is at this point that the somewhat political question of the locus of control turns to the more scientific question of causality. If we are to have an adequate explanation and understanding of the meeting of audience member and the medium, we have to obtain a sense of the true causes of media behavior and of the intellectual or cognitive framework of the viewer. Blumler (1979) informs his reader that these individual "orientations"... "covary with numerous other communication relevant factors such as (a) people's circumstances and roles, (b) their personality dispositions and capacities, (c) their actual patterns of mass media consumption, and (d) ultimately, the process of effects itself" (p. 202). Note that his (a) and (b) factors can be listed as causes of these "orientations" and that (c) and to a lesser degree (d) are effects of these orientations. Blumler, unwittingly, seems to be outlining the spurious relationship that characterizes some of the aspects of the active audience concept.

The more active audience theorists look deep inside these "active individuals" who "bend the media" to their uses, the more the theorists find that their active audience members are transparent. Motivations or "orientations" are mentioned but these tend to fade in reference to social and psychological origins of

these "causes." In the very act of trying to rescue the individual from the rhetoric of mass society, the active audience theorist inevitably delivers him or her once again to the tossings of social forces. The admitted antagonism (Blumler, 1979) of the active audience theorist to mass audience terminology leads him or her to avoid dissolving the causal force of the individual agent into antecedent social and socio-psychological variables. The individual consciousness and body is definitely the locus of action but not necessarily the locus of control.

TOWARDS A MORE MODEST APPRAISAL OF ACTIVITY

Does all the discussion over the activity of the audience merely boil down to a general statement that the individual or individual intentionality is a mediating variable? Or is it a phenomenological exploration of the meaning of media, media use, and media content to the individual, a Copernican shift that places the audience member's motivations at the center of a research universe?

But how far can we go with this concept beyond phenomenologically tinged descriptions of the experience of the media as "lived." For Carey and Kreiling (1974) and Swanson (1979) this is valid enough, liberating the individual action from the functionalist or system-oriented strings sought by puppeteer social scientists. In this "action/motivational" perspective (McQuail & Gurevitch, 1974) external explanatory frames are cast off and the audience member himself or herself validates the language of experience. This subjective experience of the media and ones' action with the media is indeed a highly desirable source of study. But its aggregation as data in the spirit of functionalist hubris does

not necessarily define an "objective" reality. With all the statistical manipulations of these self reports, the active audience researcher cannot really declare these constitute the sum of the interaction between media and audience. As Carey and Kreiling (1974) so aptly point out,

> In any universe of discourse persons construct legitimations that make their own normative patterns of behavior appear right and reasonable, and social scientists often conspire with such communities to heighten the plausiblity of their activities. (p.230)

If, as the individual constructs his or her reality and the content of semantic memory, a team of social structures, media structures, and biological structures stand "actively" beside audience members handing the individual the bricks and mortar of that self construction, then what are we to make of this product? If the fully anchored causes for "activity" of the audience are ignored or cannot be adequately specified other than individually self-reported causes or motivations, then what kind of science can we build other than a phenomenological inventory of meanings, rationalizations, and, sometimes, false consciousness.

One fall back position is to argue for some variant of the transactional model (McLeod and Becker, 1974, 1979; Schramm, 1983) hearalded by Bauer (1964). In Bauer's formulation it was couched in the language of the marketplace with references to "hard bargains," "contracts," and one's "money's worth." The analogy conveniently implies an equitable exchange between equals, or "at least most of the time." The analogy is an attractive one to some researchers as it makes the media-audience transaction fit so neatly into the logic of the American socio-economics. It hails the "sovereign consumer" in the communication marketplace. But as Schramm

(1983) notes, the transaction is just as often "inequitable." Just as Galbraith (1964) and others have largely exploded the business myth of the independent "sovereign consumer," the "hard bargaining" active audience member may be more myth than substance. The audience member has power but rarely as an isolated "active individual" but, as Sartre observed above, more often as part of an active group. The individual indeed acts and chooses but within an ideological structure whose raison d'etre is successful manipulation, advocacy, or ideological hegemony presented as information or entertainment.

As researchers begin to specify in greater detail the social, neuropsychological, cognitive, environmental, and the formal structures which influence the individual cognition and behavior, the part shuffled off to unspecified repositories called "Will," "ego," "projected acts," etc., becomes either smaller or divided into more complex social and cognitive processes. Hawkins and Pingree (in press) in their attempt to specify various cognitive "activities" indicate that a major part of their list includes activities that are essential to the process of decoding media content but which bear no necessary relationship to the derivation of sender or receiver oriented meaning. The specification of cognitive activities does not necessarily lead to a theory of the ideosyncratic construction of semantic memory.

For some theorists the active audience concept may almost be a mystical entity with some of the causal power once ascribed to similar ideological fulcrums such as the "soul," "reason," "the will", "the ego." These are all centers of activity and self-direction. The active-passive debate could be freer of need to establish the center of the communication universe: the individual,

the medium, or the culture. Unfortunately, the communication universe already bedeviled with complexity becomes more so when such relativity abandons a search for a solid center.

In this more relative universe that we propose, individuals do not so much act, as react and interact within humanly created constellations of social and cognitive structures. The question of initiative at any point in time artifically isolates a moment in the communication process. Given the philosophical foundations of western society, it is understandibly difficult to cede any ground regarding the sanctity and power of the individual, the temple of rationalism. Our vision is often clouded by our desire to see self-determined, and self-reliant individuals. Self-determined individuals are by definition self-created and we cannot declare their cognitive or behavioral independence (to use unfortunate phrasing from Hawkins and Pingree) by "endors(ing)" or "granting independence and subjectivity to viewers in constructing meanings." It is dangerous when this philosophical commitment fosters theoretical ghosts which haunt our understanding of the processes of mass media, the use of semiotic systems, and the construction of semantic memory.

An answer to problems with the more ideological versions of the active audience construct was ironically given by Bauer (1964) twenty years ago:

> The real issue is whether our social model of man - the model we use for running society - and our scientific model or models - the ones we use for running our subjects - should be identical. That general answer should be "No"..(p. 319)

Without subscribing to the possibility of an ideology free

science, we can observe that in an effort to pursue goals of audience independence from manipulation and to achieve a certain rationalistic freedom, some mass communication researchers simply made their proposed social model their scientific one also. It is after all easier to change ones scientific model to match ones desired social model, than to ask to change society to fit that same desired social model.

Many forms of the active audience construct were an overreaction bred of disillusionment with mass communicators' lack of success as manipulators. But this disillusionment was simply an intractable reality interfering with social engineering fantasies of the social sciences.

The goal of the active audience theorists is to free men from the undue influence of the media by showing how they <u>already</u> are free. Originally devised to show how the individual was free from communicator manipulation, the active audience concept may have come full circle. According to Levy and Windahl (1984a) who used activity as a variable rather than a simple declaration, the "active audience" may be "<u>more affected</u>" by the media. The thesis is dialectically transformed into its antithesis. Bauer's (1964) "imperviousness to influence" evaporates.

We can see that the concept of active audience defined as cognitive independence, personal freedom, and imperviousness to influence appears simultaneously to be both bloated out of all proportions and seemingly anemic and thin. It covers everything the audience member does while specifying little and excluding nothing. Every twitch, every thought, every choice both mindful and mindless are recorded as evidence of "activity." By this definition only a

corpse propped in front of a television set could be registered as the member of the much scorned "passive audience." For real human beings throbbing with life in a society which - thankfully - has not yet reached a point of psychic and social closure, of total determinism, should we be surprised when as social scientists we behold perception, choice, reflection, and even selection? And if in the shopping isles of media fare our active citizen chooses his or her banalities in pink, blue, or red boxes, should we pronounce them free, active, and "impervious to influence?"

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NOTES

1. Note that Satre's "talking back" to the set is a political one. Activity such as the parasocial activity cited by Levy (1984) would in this view be essentially meaningless in face of the essential passivity of the viewer as the recepticle, individually colored as it may be, for the flow of information.

2. Dervin reviews sympathetically assertions of a society composed of scattered islands of individually constructed "personal information" tailored to "unique worlds." She comes to this positon after lengthy criticism of concepts of "objective" or "absolute" information. She asserts, "Information is a construction, a product of observer and observation"(p. 91). While criticisms of objectivist notions of information may indeed be valid her exagerration of phenomenological subjectivism pushes the ideosyncratic decodings by the individual to borders of solipsism. While the individual experience of phenomenological subjectivity may be an existential fact, the content of consciouness is intersubectively determined unless we opt for a variant of philosophical idealism.

But the espousal of radically relativistic information denies not only the objectivity of information but also the intersubjectivity of the communication process. She herself observes, "If one were to believe the literature, one would think that people used information hardly at all." But she realizes, "...the evidence runs counter to the nature of human existence."

Society exists within the individual in the language and other semiotic systems that he or she uses to encode information. The radical uniqueness of subsequent decodings insinuated by Dervin and some of the constructivists run counter to the very process of communication which implies the bridging of subjectivities. The radical subjectivism and individualistic information constructions suggested by Dervin's relativistic information universe are not the social norm but rather such ideosyncratic decodings would be more commonly associated with autistic or schizophrenic processing of information. <u>These</u> decodings do indeed lead to "unique worlds" but they are not the stuff of most social communication, otherwise communication itself would be impossible.

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